



Gabbard, D. (2008). Review of *After Multiculturalism: The Politics of Race and the Dialectics of Liberty*. *Workplace*, 15, 158-162.

Review of John F. Welsh's *After Multiculturalism: The Politics of Race and the Dialectics of Liberty* (Lexington Books, 2008)

David Gabbard

If we accept his arguments on their own terms, John F. Welsh delivers on each of his three stated purposes in writing *After Multiculturalism: The Politics of Race and the Dialectics of Liberty*. First, in his exceptionally even-handed and insightful overviews of individualist and libertarian thinkers, he successfully challenges “the notion that collectivist and statist ideologies ‘own’ racism as a social and public policy issue.” Second, through those same analyses, he successfully demonstrates how each of the individualist and libertarian thinkers described offers a powerful critique of racism, as a statist and/or collectivist construct. Finally, bringing those same individualist and libertarian ideas to bear in his critique of multiculturalism as a “mirror image” of racism (i.e., a statist and collectivist construct), Welsh offers a very compelling argument against the likelihood that multiculturalism will “promote the types of actions and changes that are necessary to overcoming racism in American society.”

Accepting the terms of his arguments, however, presents a number of serious problems that undermine the otherwise noteworthy contributions that he makes toward our understanding of the anti-racist foundations of individualist and libertarian thought. This is made all the more tragic by the fact that Welsh opens his book by demonstrating a very sound understanding of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s classic book on the social construction of knowledge: *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) and how their account of the social dialectic (i.e., the notion that humans create reality, while the reality they create also creates them) offers a useful approach for understanding “the meanings and origins of race, ethnicity, and racism” (4). Owing to the social dialectic, “for humans, and because of humans, the ultimate reality of race and racism are what humans create and live. Race and racism,” he explains,

exist as socio-cultural constructs that are created, communicated, and known through symbolic interaction and supported by political power . . . The biological and physical dimensions of race (as well as its social and political dimensions) do not speak or act for themselves. They become real and meaningful in human experience only because they are defined as such by humans interacting in a symbolic and political environment that is frequently characterized by conflict, violence, and contradiction. (11)

Also borrowing from Berger and Luckmann, Welsh explains that

People within the same sociocultural environment tend to typify situations similarly and rarely negate or question the origins or ultimate sources of these typifications because they have internalized the objectivated constructions in their society. Thus, constructions about race and ethnicity, including both group categories and beliefs about qualities associated with them, are internalized by individuals in socialization processes occurring through the family, the school, the media, the church, and the polity. (p. 5)

In light of his sound understanding of these principles, we are left to ponder Welsh's motivation for framing the reification of race and racism as a function of the federal government and the statist tendencies within multiculturalism? The following passages typify that framing:

The multiculturalist argument in favor of a reified concept of race and ethnicity has a political agenda, whether open or hidden, that seeks greater cultural and political advocacy for some racial and ethnic groups, usually at the expense of others. (9)

The term "race" itself is far from conceptually clear in cultural and policy discourse in North America, but it has acquired a reified status in large part because the federal government classified the physical qualities of individuals into fixed, codified racial categories as a means of identifying protected classes of people. (7)

Multicultural discourse tends toward the conceptualization of race as a trans-human fact that has an ultimate reality that is fixed and not an outcome of human activity, thus uncritically reflecting the state's imposition of a reified concept of race. (7)

Historically, the federal government played an enormously important role in the formation of ethno-racial groups in the United States from the 1950s to the early twenty-first century. . . .

The social facticity of race, to borrow from Berger and Luckmann's terminology, is not due to an artifact of biology or civil society, it is the result of the racial activism of the federal government. (11)

Ultimately, Welsh wants to frame both multiculturalism and racism as statist ideologies to support his argument that individualist and libertarian theories help us escape their respective constraints. "Racism," he says, "is a statist ideology in that it requires political authority, power, law, and public policy to enforce the domination and subjugation of racial, ethnic, and linguistic groups" (p.15). While we cannot deny the historical role of the state in legalizing and enforcing racist practices, neither can we avoid discussing the "symbolic and political environment" responsible for the ascension of racism as state policy. That discussion, of course, would entail opening up for analysis the importance of racist ideology in justifying the most egregious expressions of heteronomy (e.g., slavery

and genocide) endemic to capitalism, as well as the historic role of capitalism in giving birth to the modern nation state.

Perhaps we can attribute Welsh's reluctance to engage in that conversation to his sympathy for the Objectivist views of Ayn Rand that he presents in Chapter Two, where he rationalizes more than he critiques her notion of laissez-faire capitalism as an "unknown ideal." If, for Rand, "race is a mystique because it mystifies," then the notion of "laissez-faire capitalism" is no less mystifying in that it "confers legitimacy on the illegitimate social and cultural expropriation of individual liberty" imposed under capitalism. In presenting "laissez-faire capitalism" as an "unknown ideal," Rand (and, by default, Welsh) creates a mystifying apologia for actually-existing capitalism. Whatever abuse or injustice perpetrated by capitalism occurs as a consequence of something else, never capitalism in itself. Though Welsh does admit that "the performance of capitalist social systems on racial and ethnic issues was not perfect, or even very good, at times," he does nothing to challenge Rand's contention that "the extant racism was not due to capitalism, the individualist ethos, or to the relatively open political system but was due to the persistence of contradictory elements of collectivism, altruism, and statism in American politics and culture" (51), as if the super-exploitation of certain classes of workers (i.e. racial minorities) has had nothing to do with perpetuating racism, or the fact that most of the support for the Ku Klux Klan comes from local business classes. Welsh even goes further to give credit to "capitalist social systems" –not democratic political systems (the dreaded state) – for allowing "critique and opposition to racism" and permitting "some progress toward the elimination of racism" (ibid).

While he is quick to criticize the determinist character of racism and multiculturalism, he demonstrates no reservation to express and support a deterministic view of the state as inherently bad, even blaming the state for reversing "progress toward the elimination of racism" effected, presumably, by the "capitalist social system." "In the United States," Welsh writes,

even as early as the 1960s, progress toward the elimination of racism was largely reversed because of the growth of a collectivist welfare state that is dedicated to responding to racism and all other policy problems through collective blame and increased governmental control. In Rand's view, the consequence of the increased collectivization and incipient statism in the United States was the birth of a 'new, virulent growth of racism.' Racism increased as the programs and controls of the welfare state expanded. (ibid)

His deterministic characterization of the state reaches its apex as he embraces Chris Matthew Sciabarra's notion of the

'predatory state' which imposes an altruistic and collectivist ideology that legitimates the sacrifice of individual rights to the so-called public good and expropriates the economic value created by individuals for distribution by the state. The mixed economy functions through an absolute state that preys upon individuals and groups in order to promote the agenda of advocacy group that prevail in the

public policy process. The predatory state exacerbates racial and ethnic tension by setting individuals and groups against each other because of the arbitrary and unearned expropriation and redistribution of resources and other social desiderata. The state, no the market and not the civil society, is the social institution that defines individual, social, and cultural value and allocates desiderata accordingly. (51-52)

Not only does this fail to take account of how capitalism “expropriates the economic value created by individuals,” it exemplifies a larger problem in Welsh’s analysis. Ultimately, what most afflicts Welsh’s discussion of these issues is a dangerous sense of ahistoricism that prevents him from recognizing the collectivism and tribalism emanating from the business classes that have and continue to constitute the most powerful “advocacy group.” Adam Smith recognized this as early as 1776, noting how they, “regard the character of the sovereign [the state] as but an appendix to that of the merchant, as something which ought to be made subservient to it” (Smith, 277).

In light of the collective power of those interests within the state apparatus, and their use of that apparatus to increase their power, not to mention their wealth, what choice have oppressed groups ever had but to organize, mobilize, and exercise their own collective power to counter that of their oppressors? When Welsh follows the ahistorical lead of Ayn Rand and others in blaming the state for a resurgence of racism during periods when the state actually responds to the demands of racial minorities to protect or expand their liberties and rights, he ignores the extent to which that resurgence finds its origins in the capitalist class. Welsh and others should recall the extent to which this class helped to organize and fund hate-groups like the Ku Klux Klan, and that these groups were used to suppress unionization, not just the civil rights of racial minorities. Moreover, collectivism is a right they reserve for themselves, while denying it to those responsible for creating their wealth for them.

There is also another difficulty with Welsh’s claim that “racism is a statist ideology in that it requires political authority, power, law, and public policy to enforce the domination and subjugation of racial, ethnic, and linguistic groups” (15). Now that the state has effectively renounced racism, does that mean that racism no longer exist in America? Welsh himself encourages us to reject multiculturalism on the basis of it, too, being a statist ideology “in that it looks to the state, public, and institutional policy and enforcement mechanisms to ameliorate, rectify, or eliminate forms of prejudice” (ibid). In its place, he proposes the notion of *postethnicity* to help us deal with our lingering problems of race. As he elaborates in Chapter Seven, “postethnicity seeks to redirect some of the thinking about race and ethnicity in a direction that will promote less of an emphasis on ‘communities of shared descent’ and more of an emphasis on ‘communities of choice,’ or willed affiliations by people” (178). But what will affect this will? How do we know that people won’t choose their current configurations of “willed affiliations,” even though their wills may have been conditioned by racism? The recent primary contests of the Democratic Party in West Virginia and Kentucky surely brought home to us the extent to which racism is still very much alive in America (as if we needed reminding). Welsh leaves us to wonder how West Virginians and Kentuckians, or any

other group of Americans, will come into contact with the idea of postethnicity to resolve their racial issues. We can only hope that the book's publisher has developed a very aggressive marketing plan.

In the end, while *After Multiculturalism* does succeed on its own terms – even though we can take deep issue with the terms on which it succeeds, Welsh offers little in the way of suggestions on how we can actually move toward postethnicity. Nevertheless, having enjoyed my conversation with the book and learned a great deal from Welsh's presentation of individualist and libertarian ideas on race and multiculturalism, I strongly recommend the book.

Bibliography

Berger, Peter L. and Luckmann, Thomas. (1966). *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Doubleday.

Smith, Adam. (1776/1952) *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica.